

Two Good Schools Are Not All We're Losing

Well into thirtysomething, I find myself more prone to nostalgia. I'm embarrassed to admit I got teary over "Field of Dreams," an absurdly mawkish film about baseball, or something. Now my high school is closing down, and the sense of loss somehow seems greater than it ought to be. Perhaps more than a gilded memory really is being lost.

The local Catholic diocese has decided to shut down two high schools in Green Bay, Wis., where I grew up. Abbot Pennings, the all-boys school my brothers and I attended, and St. Joseph Academy, an all-girls school my mother and sisters attended, have both declared this their final year. The Baby Bust has reduced the number of potential students, fewer priests and nuns are available to teach and costs and tuition have gone up—the immediate reasons are unremarkable.

But the schools themselves are remarkable enough that their demise may speak to everyone. Only two months ago, St. Joe's was among 218 secondary schools from around the country cited by President George Bush for excellence. The selection process includes a two-day on-site visit and tracking the schools' graduates. St. Joe's sends 93% of its young women to college. Drugs are rarely a problem, and when they are teachers and parents descend to straighten it out. Not the sort of place to close amid an education crisis.

"Whatever the young women want to do, we really push them and say, try it,"

Potomac Watch

By Paul A. Gigot

explains Sister Helen Rottier, St. Joe's principal. "Our whole emphasis is on moral education." The school isn't afraid to put secular achievement in the context of what Sister Helen calls "the spiritual." With even Norman Lear now bemoaning the decline of spirituality in American life, maybe St. Joe's is ahead of the game.

Pennings in my day was atavistic without realizing it. The school had discipline; even in the efflorescence of the 1960s, kids wore coats and ties. (The bow to rebellious individuality was that most kids wore the same coat and tie all year.) It had committed teachers who enforced standards; Latin was taught as a long march of memorization. Conjugate or die—of humiliation. It had parents who paid attention, but not so much as to interfere when their rowdier sons had to be collared. Parents didn't sue.

What it has never had is money, or platoons of counselors, or high technology, or the other things our educators advise us schools must now have. The school building itself, a red-brick refugee from the warehouse era, might have been condemned at any time. The sweatbox of a gym ended with the baskets; to play run-and-gun basketball was suicide. This was no Dead Poets' Society for rich kids, either. Tuition in my day was \$260 a year; now it's up to \$1,800, but nearly 40% of the kids are on scholarship. Sons of machinists learn next to doctors' kids.

The school is run by the Norbertine Order of priests, a teaching order not unlike, though not as renowned as, the Jesuits. They favored a curriculum that was James Madison—basic. But far from offering dull conformity, the teachers took intellectual risks. A sophomore religion teacher introduced us to William James's "The Varieties of Religious Experience." A history teacher forced us to debate topics of the day, once casting me to defend socialized medicine. (A fashionable McGovernite at the time, I kept tripping over my opponent's point about "incentives"; the seeds of common sense were planted.)

The same instructor, "Doc" Coyle, assigned "reports" from articles in *The New Republic* and *National Review*. One favorite was by sociologist Peter Berger on "The Paradoxes of American Conservatism."

Doc Coyle: First, please define paradox for the class.

Student: Ummmm . . .

It is a paradox of modern life that the most intellectually tolerant are often those most grounded in orthodoxy.

The Norbertines, like most religious orders, have not multiplied with modernity. Many who once taught have since left the priesthood. One left teaching to become a marriage counselor and married a woman he counseled. The order now takes in only two or three new "vocations" a year. The Norbertines still run a couple of schools in the East, including one in Delaware that taught Sen. Joseph Biden.

Modern culture has also changed the Sisters of St. Joseph of Carondelet, who've run St. Joe's for 94 years. The Catholic Church's Second Vatican Council gave the sisters a broader choice of "ministry," says Sister Helen. Rather than teach middle-class kids, most of the nuns now prefer to work with the homeless, or in Peru or Chile.

Peter Berger—reading habits learned in school are hard to shake—and Richard John Neuhaus once wrote that modern America tends to shatter what Burke called the "little platoons" of community. Schools, voluntary groups, churches, even families are battered between our passion for individual rights and the giant companies and government that can seem so impersonal. Pennings and St. Joe's are two little platoons, smaller communities, on which bigger ones build. Tuition tax credits might have saved one or both, but the American public seems to have decided this is not a policy it can support.

So it does not pay to be nostalgic about what cannot be changed. Green Bay's public schools are better than most. A Catholic high school will remain open on the other side of the city for kids willing to make the commute. But come next September there will be two fewer little communities of allegiance, two fewer good schools and something will have been lost.